News



Sr. Rosemary Nyirumbe, a member of Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, and Sr. Josephine Anto, a member of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus, pose for a photo outside the arena where the Women Deliver 2023 Conference is taking place, July 17 in Kigali, Rwanda. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)



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As the Women Deliver 2023 Conference, or WD2023, kicked off in this East African nation's capital, hundreds of religious sisters in Africa attending the gathering shared their achievements with the organizers and partners since the conference began in 2007.

The conference, held July 17-20, is one of the world's largest conferences focused on gender equality, health, and the rights and well-being of girls and women. The gathering brings together more than 6,000 people, including civil society, government, the private sector, women's rights organizations and movements, and advocates representing communities facing systemic discrimination. On-site attendees came from more than 165 countries, with more than 200,000 people joining online through the virtual conference.

The conference theme is "Spaces, Solidarity, and Solutions." The leaders and advocates convening in Kigali aim to enable inclusive and co-created spaces that foster solidarity for sustainable solutions on gender equality.

"We have deliberately chosen this theme with action in mind," Maliha Khan, Women Deliver president and CEO, said recently in a press release. "Spaces, because it's only when we create inclusive spaces that we can get to the heart of our challenges; solidarity, because it's only when we work together and take collective action that we can create the solutions needed to advance gender equality and improve the wellbeing of girls and women, in all their intersecting identities."



The main entrance of the arena where the Women Deliver 2023 Conference is taking place in Kigali, Rwanda, July 17-20. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

Religious sisters noted that every day in every country, women and girls are discriminated against because of their gender. The sisters said women and girls continue to face domestic and sexual violence and human trafficking and are denied the opportunity to access education, job opportunities, health care, and to lead.

Sr. Immaculate Uwamariya from the Bernardine Sisters has been at the forefront of ending gender-based violence in Rwanda. Through her organization, Famille Espérance (Family of Hope), Uwamariya has fought child marriages and all forms of violence against women and girls.

The World Health Organization estimates that about one in three women globally experience gender-based violence during their lifetime.

The nun has trained hundreds of religious leaders, advocates, members of civil society groups, elders, teachers, and parents on the importance of preventing their

communities from the harmful practice of child marriage and violence against women and girls. Her organization conducts regular counseling for couples and partners to ensure they live harmoniously.

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"We have achieved gender equality by helping women who experience physical or sexual violence by an intimate partner, and we continue to use words of wisdom to heal the wounds of these families living in abusive relationships," she said, noting that she mentors about 700 couples each year and that her organization has more than 500 members.

Uwamariya, who has won various national honors and awards for her work, said her organization's efforts have reduced domestic violence and helped thousands of young girls continue their education.

"Family protection is closely linked to the principle of equality and nondiscrimination," she said, revealing that during WD2023, her organization will engage with grassroots advocates, decision-makers, representatives of the private sector and nonprofit organizations, and youth to address current issues affecting women and girls. "I think the conference is a good platform to explore ways to help families become more gender equal. But empowered women and girls are change agents in this regard."



Delegates from different countries arrive in Kigali to attend the Women Deliver 2023 Conference July 17. The conference's theme is "Spaces, Solidarity, and Solutions." (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

Sr. Jane Wakahiu, associate vice president of program operations and head of the Catholic Sisters Initiative at the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, said the foundation has supported over 3,000 Catholic sisters from across the African continent to build their capacity through education and social services in health care so that they can serve better in their own ministries.

"Working with sisters alone opens up a series of working with women," Wakahiu, a member of the Institute of the Little Sisters of St. Francis, Kenya, told Global Sisters Report. "As per supporting women and girls, we have a strategy for livelihoods and career pathways. Through the foundation resources, we work with religious sisters to help vulnerable youth to get access to skills development, entrepreneurship, job placement, and even startup capital to start their own businesses."

Wakahiu noted that the foundation has a project meant to ensure girls who dropped out of school due to early pregnancy or unpaid fees return to school so that they can achieve their dreams. The project also helps women with entrepreneurial skills and finances to start their businesses, earn, and finally become independent. The program, she said, is being run by the Jesuit Conference of Africa and Madagascar in partnership with three conferences of major superiors, the Association of Sisterhoods of Kenya, the Zambia Association of Sisterhoods, and the Association of Religious in Uganda.

"Through these three countries, we are bringing girls back to school," she said. "We also partner with the government through this project to help change the policies or implement policies that are gender friendly so that these young women can be allowed to thrive and return to school."

The Conrad N. Hilton Foundation is among the sponsors of the Women Deliver 2023 Conference. The foundation also funds Global Sisters Report.



Sr. Jane Wakahiu, associate vice president of program operations and the head of Catholic Sisters Initiative at Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, poses for a photo with Peter Laugharn, the foundation's current president and chief executive officer. The Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, which funds GSR, is among the Women Deliver 2023 Conference participants in Kigali, Rwanda. (GSR photo/Doreen Ajiambo)

Meanwhile, Sr. Rosemary Nyirumbe of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus based in Uganda told GSR that she was born with a passion for caring for girls and women. Nyirumbe said that in 2002 she started an orphanage in Gulu, a city in the northern region of Uganda, to shelter women and girls whose lives had been shattered by violence, rape and sexual exploitation.

The nun said she was motivated to go to northern Uganda and save and transform the lives of girls and women who had been brutally tortured, raped and abandoned by rebel soldiers of the Lord's Resistance Army, a militant group led by Joseph Kony that has waged a civil war against the government and peoples of northern Uganda since the late 1980s.

The militants abducted at least 30,000 children, and the war displaced more than 2 million people, especially women and children, from their homes. Stationed at St. Monica's convent in Gulu by her religious order, Nyirumbe ended up housing thousands of women and girls who had nowhere to go.

Nyirumbe said she was later inspired by the vision and objectives of Women Deliver to start St. Monica's Girls Tailoring School to provide vocational education to girls and women in the areas of agriculture, business, tailoring, hairdressing, and hospitality to prepare them to be self-reliant.

"I believe that women need support to take care of themselves, and that's the reason we are empowering them with entrepreneurship skills and the ability to make a living," she said, noting that she had enrolled more than 2,000 girls and women who had been previously abducted by the Lord's Resistance Army or abandoned by their families.

"Most of these women are also not learned, so we teach them how to read and write in English or Swahili. This always makes them become their own advocates and empowers them with some bargaining skills as they go about the day-to-day

business in the community."

Nyirumbe, also among dozens of speakers at the Women Deliver 2023 Conference, said she was planning to share her knowledge and skills with other partners during her address so that women and girls worldwide continue to be empowered.

"As for this conference, I can say everything about women interests me," she said. "As a woman, I love this conference. I will share my knowledge and hope to learn more other skills from my fellow women here to go and continue helping my community."